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SUBJECT: GOVERNANCE IN PANJSHIR - PEEKING UNDER THE HOOD

11. (SBU) Summary: The government and people of Panjshir have firm control of their own security, providing a safe environment for development and enabling the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to undertake \$65 million worth of projects. However, human capacity remains weak. Perceived neglect by the central government, coupled with Panjshir,s Mujahadeen culture, stifles the development of modern institutions and links to Kabul. Bereft of resources and indigenous expertise, Panjshiris look first to the PRT to meet their development needs. Governor Bahlol has done a great deal for the province and for the PRT, but his leadership style limits the space for competent bureaucrats to grow. The Panjshir PRT is working closely with the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) on strategies to support and empower provincial officials so that they -- not the U.S. -- are setting development priorities for the province. Panjshirs, unrivaled security situation makes it an excellent laboratory to try out new civilian-led approaches aimed at building Afghan governance and ownership. End Summary.

PANJSHIR: A SECURITY SUCCESS

12. (U) It is sometimes easy to forget that Panjshir lies in a war zone. There are no security barriers to travel within the valley. Conex shops line the excellent main road, which has been widened and paved by the PRT. Road construction is everywhere, and a few modern homes are starting to rise above the traditional mud dwellings. Girls and boys are being educated, even in the most remote villages. Afghan National Police (ANP) checkpoints are rare, and the Afghan National Army (ANA) has no presence at all, except for a small recruiting center and a few guards watching MOD weapons stockpiles. Voters had no difficulty getting to the polls on August 20, casting their votes in a calm and orderly process.

13. (SBU) Credit for Panjshir,s excellent security situation goes to the Panjshiris themselves, a proud and insular people of overwhelmingly Tajik (97 percent) ethnicity. Panjshiris are proud of their resistance against the Soviets and the Taliban, and their post-9/11 partnership with U.S. forces to run the Taliban out of Kabul. This legacy of security cooperation led to the establishment in 2005 of the unique Panjshir PRT: civilian-led, with no maneuver element, and protected by local Mujahadeen guards rather than by a U.S. security force. Since 2005, security incidents have been rare, although the PRT did experience an IED/small arms attack in July. There were no casualties, and four suspects remain in NDS custody (Note: the tragic deaths earlier this year of four PRT personnel, including LTC Mark Stratton, took place in Kapisa, not Panjshir).

GOVERNANCE: THE MISSING LINK

¶4. (U) Panjshir,s unparalleled security situation has enabled the PRT to undertake some \$65 million in projects since 2005, including roads, schools, clinics, micro-hydro power generators, and agriculture. However, the ease of PRT building comes at a price: Panjshiris expect more from the PRT than from their own institutions. Locals perceive (correctly) that the central government has given them little. Governor Bahlol,s poor relationship with Karzai -- the two have not had a meeting in nearly five years -- contributes to this sense of neglect. Ministers seldom visit. Meanwhile, the provincial Line Directors suffer from the usual ailments afflicting their colleagues elsewhere: weak capacity, few resources, and a lack of influence over ministry decisions. Unmotivated and short of gas money, few Line Directors venture far from their offices in the provincial capital.

¶5. (SBU) Governance in Panjshir is defined by the province's Mujahadeen culture. In the run-up to the August 20 elections, some questioned whether former Defense Minister Marshal Fahim could effectively activate his former sub-commanders to generate votes for President Karzai, widely despised in Panjshir, where he captured less than 1 percent of the vote in 2004. Karzai,s take of nearly 28 percent this time around -- despite Governor Bahlol,s efforts to suppress those votes -- suggests Panjshir,s informal Mujahadeen structures remain largely intact. Abdullah Abdullah has strong support in Panjshir,s lower districts, where (the overtly pro-Abdullah) Governor Bahlol served as top commander in his Mujahadeen days, and whose residents

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still follow his lead.

¶6. (SBU) Panjshir,s Mujahadeen culture, a sort of "benign warlordism," benefits security but stifles the acceptance of national institutions. Across the province, former fighters, mullahs, and ordinary villagers serve as the eyes and ears of the ANP and NDS, an informal "neighborhood watch" that makes Panjshir hostile terrain for would-be troublemakers. ANP shakedowns do not occur, probably because bad behavior of this kind would be swiftly corrected by ex-Mujahadeen elders. The system works and is unlikely to change quickly. For all of the recent infrastructure improvements, Panjshir remains a rural subsistence economy. Civil society barely exists, and young people seeking modern opportunities are quick to leave for the capital. When Governor Bahlol departs office, he will likely be replaced by another ex-Mujahadeen -- this time loyal to Fahim. Moreover, the next Provincial Council may include several representatives elected solely on the basis of their Mujahadeen credentials.

¶7. (SBU) Governor Bahlol has been a strong and effective leader, but also a domineering presence. An enthusiastic supporter of the PRT, he has intervened numerous times to solve problems impeding PRT projects and regularly chastises Line Directors when they are not doing their jobs. Bahlol,s priorities for Panjshir -- infrastructure, agriculture and education -- generally track with our own, and he has shown a fierce commitment to keeping Panjshir safe and poppy-free. He is relatively uncorrupt and appears genuinely committed to the people of the province. Yet he remains a Mujahadeen to his core, displaying imperfect skills as a manager and administrator, sucking up most of the political oxygen, and leaving little room for other officials to grow. To some extent, his domineering approach to governance absolves the provincial Line Directors from taking charge of their own portfolios.

PRT PANJSHIR: SHIFTING THE FOCUS

¶8. (U) Panjshir,s Provincial Development Council (PDC),

chaired by Governor Bahlol, meets regularly and is well-attended by Line Directors and the small number of NGOs that operate in the province. However, as an Afghan-led process, it is yet to reach its full potential. Discussions are often bloated and unfocused. Participants identify needs but fail to identify their own roles and responsibilities. Instead of prioritizing projects, participants approve whatever comes before them, particularly if the Governor is interested, and defer serious funding decisions to the PRT. There is no need for trade-offs, and little if any strategic planning. Panjshir's Provincial Development Plan (PDP), completed in 2007, is out of date and somewhat irrelevant. Worse, Line Directors fail to coordinate their activities with one another, through the required sector meetings, before the PDC meets.

¶9. (U) PRT Director has been working with UNAMA on strategies to address these problems and to encourage greater Afghan ownership in provincial development. At the PRT's behest, UNAMA has rolled out a proposal for updating the Provincial Development Plan this fall, putting local officials squarely in the lead. Governor Bahlol agrees and the first meeting occurred on September 28. UNAMA has emphasized the importance of effective sector meetings, with participation by all Line Directors, in order to prepare decisions by the PDC. As a result, PRT personnel now attend every sector meeting, to encourage coordination and Afghan ownership. PRT leadership is also engaging intensively with individual Line Directors, and integrating them into all PRT projects, in order to support and empower them.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: After years of successful infrastructure projects, the time is ripe in Panjshir to focus on human capacity-building, looking beyond the Governor's office to build a cadre of bureaucrats who can link the province to Kabul. "Model" may not be the best word to describe Panjshir, given that not all of its advantages -- its unique history, mono-ethnic population, and defensible geography -- can be replicated elsewhere. Panjshir might be thought of instead as a platform for the projection of stability outward, and as a natural laboratory to try out new civilian-led approaches aimed at building good governance and Afghan ownership. End Comment.
EIKENBERRY